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HOW I FOUND  
THE BUNYAN WARRANT

BY

W. G. THORPE, F.S.A.

OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE

*Reprinted from THE GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE for February 1890*



London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1890

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## HOW I FOUND THE BUNYAN WARRANT.

WHY is "The Antiquary" the most popular of Scott's novels? It is purely a sketch of social life—no historical personages figure in it—an ordinary thunder-storm and an equally (in those days) common duel are the pivots on which the story turns. So that the attraction cannot be here. Nor can it be the curious blunder which makes the sun, seen from Auchmithie Bay (on the Scotch eastern coast) set in the east! Readers do not pick up such small inconsistencies, any more than does any one in the full swing and go of the "Battle of the Lake Regillus," pause at Macaulay's famous slip in verse 14 :

And louder still and louder  
Rose from the darkened field  
The braying of the war horns,  
The clang of sword and shield,  
The rush of squadrons sweeping  
Like whirlwinds o'er the plain,  
The shouting of the slayers,  
*And screeching of the slain.*

The charm probably lies in two studies from life—the characters of Edie Ochiltree and Mr. Oldbuck—especially the last. Who is there that has not enjoyed the "Ower-true Tale" of Snuffy Davy, who bought a Caxton for 2*d.* and sold it for £20?

Not that history does not even in these instances repeat itself. In the Caxton Exhibition was shown a "Recuyel of Troye," in absolutely faultless condition, which a Salisbury bookseller had parted with for 12*s.* 6*d.*, thinking it a manuscript, which it had indeed originally been intended to resemble. The deal was £400 in the buyer's pocket, and the seller was ever afterwards "difficult" when a customer dropped in and asked him for manuscripts, as some who knew the story would mischievously do.

Mistakes, and knock-outs as well, occur in book auctions. Not so long ago a first folio Shakespeare was cleverly purchased for

£25, and the parties concerned amicably divided the difference between that modest "pony" and the £400 given by one of their number at the subsequent private auction among themselves. Mis-chances, too, come about, when the right man has stopped away and the wrong man turned up. Like the recent Ayrshire election, where, by the break-down of a waggonette, half-a-dozen Unionists missed their train to Paris, and had absolutely nothing else to do but to go to the poll and turn the Gladstonian's majority of one into a minority of five.

All these instances, however (bar the knock-out), come under that form of perfectly natural sequence, which, failing to grasp its law, we term CHANCE, and to this form of development must be attributed that inexplicable, and, in its way stupendous, piece of luck, which, by the desire of some who know it, I am about to relate, and which may not be improperly preceded by a short account of the treasure itself, how it has been preserved for two centuries, and how it came to be overlooked and passed over by the keenest experts of the day, in the most open and best attended market for such things in the world.

Well then, it is familiar knowledge that "The Pilgrim's Progress" was written in prison, but the question has always been, "When?" very unsatisfactorily answered by, "The long imprisonment of twelve years ending in 1672." The tone of the book is hardly that of the pathetic passage in "Grace Abounding," a work of that period, which even now gathers tears to the eyes and thrills the reader with emotion when he comes sharp round a corner, let us say, in "Green's Short History," upon the father's piteous wail for "his poor blinde child, who lay nearer to his heart than all beside. Oh, the thoughts of the hardships thou must undergoe, though I cannot now endure the winde should blowe on thee!" Nor does the publication date of 1678 fit in with that quick and impetuous genius which gave its thoughts to the world almost as soon as they sprang from the brain. Moreover there were local traditions which pointed to a third and later imprisonment in a particular place, of some six months' duration, ended, oddly enough, by a release obtained through the bishop of the diocese—almost the very last person who could be expected to interfere for such a man, in such a case, at such a time too!

Upon these grounds Bunyan's latest biographer and successor at Bedford, the Rev. Dr. Brown, started the theory that the imprisonment of the "Progress" was in 1675, and ably developed it in his "Life of Bunyan," but no evidence supported it, and none seemed

likely to be obtained (in fact Canon Venables, no mean authority, passed the theory by as "hazy"), until my discovery of the warrant itself in July, 1887, cleared up all doubt as to the correctness of Dr. Brown's clever guess. Before proceeding further, it may be as well to describe the conditions under which the document came into existence.

It is familiar knowledge that for reasons of his own, Charles II., in the year 1672, issued a Declaration of Indulgence which set free many thousands of sufferers from the gaols in which so many of their fellows had died. But political exigencies, and the consideration of a subsidy, had brought the King to cancel that Declaration within a year from its issue. The Test Act was passed in 1673, and a Proclamation in February 1674-5 specially ordered that Conventicles should be suppressed.

The Tory squires, who had worked the Act of 35 Elizabeth with merciless severity up to the year 1671, had the handling of it once more, and without a day's delay put it in force at Bristol—where lived Dr. Chauncy, the "Schismatics' Attorney-General," as he was called—and soon after at Bedford, the home of the dauntless Bunyan. One Dr. Foster, Chancellor of Lincoln and Commissary of the Bedford Archidiaconal Court, the author of "Bunyan's first twelve years' imprisonment," at once prepared a warrant whose text runs as follows :—

"To the Constables of Bedford and to every of them  
Whereas informaçon and complaint is made unto us that (notwithstanding the Kings Maj<sup>ties</sup> late Act of most gracious gen<sup>all</sup> and free pardon to all his Subjects for past misdemeano<sup>r</sup> that by his said clemencie and indulgent grace and favo<sup>r</sup> they might bee mooved and induced for the time to come more carefully to observe his Highenes laws and Statutes and to continue in their loyall and due obedience to his Maj<sup>ties</sup>) yett one John Bunnyon of yo<sup>r</sup> said Towne Tynker hath divers times within one Month last past in contempt of his Maj<sup>ties</sup> good Lawes preached or taught at a Conventicle meeteing or assemblée under colo<sup>r</sup> or p<sup>re</sup>stence of exercise of Religion in other manner than according to the Liturgie or practise of the Church of England. These are therefore in his Maj<sup>ties</sup> name to comand you forthwith to apprehend and bring the Body of the said John Bunnion bee fore us or any of us or other his Maj<sup>ties</sup> Justice of peace within the said County to answer the premisses and further to doe and receive as to Lawe and Justice shall appertain and hereof you are not to faile Given under our handes and seales this fowerth day of March in the seven and twentieth yeare of the Raigne of our most gracious Sovereaigne Lord King Charles the Second A<sup>o</sup> 3 D<sup>ni</sup> juxta &c. 1674.

Will Spencer

Will Gery

St Jo : Chernocke

W<sup>m</sup> Daniel

T Browne

W: foster

Gaius Squier"

It will be seen that this document is signed by no less than thirteen magistrates, as though safety was thought to consist in numerical strength, and another suggestion of courage oozing out is evidenced by the fact that eight out of the thirteen had "left their seals at home," and hence had to avail themselves of those of their fellows, or of Cobb's (the Clerk of the Peace). One, in fact, used that of a stranger, and three did not seal at all; the names of these three have been squeezed in as if they had succumbed at the last moment to strong pressure.

The document itself is well written on a half-sheet of foolscap, by an expert scribe, such as would be found in a clerk of the peace's office. The wax seals, ten in number, are not at all chipped nor frayed, but so absolutely perfect that a high official in the British Museum traced all save one to their owners in less than five minutes. It is in beautiful condition, with but one small tear, and has evidently long lain folded in four with so heavy a weight of paper upon it that the seals have bored through and left their mark. It can never, therefore, have been in a constable's horny palm. Bunyan would probably on this, as on his first arrest, have gone to the constable's house and surrendered himself.

This hitherto unknown treasure has been preserved to our date by its having been sent to Dr. Ichabod Chauncy, the before-named Nonconformist's "Attorney-General," at Bristol, to see if habeas corpus would lie upon it, as it had done in the case of "Saints Rest" Baxter, whom Lord Hale had released on the ground of a flaw in the warrant. Chauncy was at that very time (May 1675) prosecuting a similar appeal on behalf of two Bristol ministers. But when this failed in their case, and the prospect opened of release by tickling the itching palm of Barlow, the slack twisted bishop of the diocese, whose bitter complaints of impecuniosity are still to be seen in the Record Office, the now useless warrant would return to the good physician's pigeon-hole, where it slumbered peacefully in company with another document which he had inherited from his father, Dr. Charles Chauncy, the second president of Harvard, from whom he had received his own pathetic name, born as he was in that agony of privation, poverty, and exile, to which the once Regius Cambridge Professor of Greek and Hebrew had been reduced by the relentless malice of Laud.

From some cause or other Dr. Chauncy's MSS. were not sent to the hammer in 1791 with his pictures, coins, and books. The catalogue of these last, and the prices they sold for, can only be read with a kind of vain regret that one wasn't one's own grandfather.



Dr. Chauncy's collection of MSS. was a somewhat peculiar one. His family, who had kept it back for a century, had an abiding conviction that they had in it a treasure worth £1,000, and they were right in their faith, though mistaken in its object. For the seven MSS. of Pope—the Essay on Man, the Dunciad, the Epistle of Sappho to Phaon, and others—which Dr. Chauncy had obtained from the novelist Richardson, the friend of Pope, were not, as they thought, the treasure in question, though they produced some hundreds of pounds, but a simple half-sheet of foolscap paper, which it had been fated should escape the notice of the keenest experts, both trade and amateurs, any quantity of whom had examined it, until after the hammer fell. Still, it was in very good company; there were autographs of Sir Francis Drake, describing one of his Armada captures, letters of Charles I., Charles II., and his Queen, while some letters from Bruges of that disreputable person, Mrs. Lucy Walters, and directions as to the education of her son, the Duke of Monmouth, under his original name of James Crofts, with Sir W. Dugdale's private report to Charles II., respecting his bastard children, pointed to their having been collected by some person standing high in the King's confidence and family secrets. Chauncy's collecting, however, was in evidence by a perfectly clean order of the Lord Protector appointing John Pointer to the rectory of Houghton Conquest on September 29, 1654, which would argue that, on deprivation in 1662, the ejected minister had forwarded his Privy Council appointment to his fellow sufferer, to see if any remedy were obtainable.

From whatever cause the sale of the Chauncy MSS. was deferred, the family at last sent them to the hammer in July 1887. The document we have in view was duly catalogued thus:—"Bunyan—Letter to the Constables of Bedford relative to the imprisonment of John Bunyan for preaching. Autograph signatures and seals, March 4, 1674;" and remained on view, as is usual, for two days previous to the sale.

It seems to have attracted no notice from the many who either for pleasure or profit look in at Wellington Street almost daily during the sale season. The entry, however, caught the writer's eye, and on examining the document two things were clear. First, that it was a warrant, though with a tremendous waste of judicial power. Second, that it might be worth looking up Bunyan's life to see what it all meant. A stroll down to the library of an old and famous club put him in touch with one of those patient and accomplished gentlemen, who pride themselves not only in knowing a good deal of the contents of the many thousands of books under their charge, but also in being able to give

quick references to them. Thus, "Please, Mr. Vincent, I want to know all about Bunyan's imprisonments" produced in two minutes Brown's Bunyan, Canon Venables' admirable "Life" in the National Biography, and others, from which, in five minutes more, the nature of the treasure stood out clear. But with it came also the uneasy reflection: "Plenty of others have seen this and looked it up, so as to know its value. It is not an ordinary common sale, the Pope MSS. will bring down the great guns, trade as well as amateur. Did not the great Mr. Piccadilly once pick out a princeps of Walton's 'Angler,' out of some cookery books? One can only hope to see it sold; to bid is useless, the thought of having it for one's very own is vain."

However, a second visit on the next day showed no diminution of the apathy. Some antiquaries looked at it as if puzzled, it is true, but all these signs were quite consistent with a very rapid rise in biddings once they were opened.

The day at last arrived, the scene of action was the old upper room where, for more than a century, book buyers have fought out their contests, where the largest sum ever given for a book, say £4,000, has been given out at the fall of the hammer. On the narrow benches, round the hollow square of tables, within which walks the "shewer," sit the giants of the old book trade, men in touch with all the libraries from China to Peru, and whose names and catalogues are known in almost every large city in the world. First comes the monarch of his craft, raised to eminence by talents which first blossomed in a little shop in St. Martin's Lane, but which have raised him, as we have said, to fortune, fame, and the highest distinctions open to him. Conspicuous as well by his keen eye, his snow-white hair, and a felt hat, whose unutterably-shocking-badness vies with those of Lord Tennyson and Sir Richard Owen, and even emulates in its way poor Sir Bartle Frere's unapproachable chimney-pot—there sits the veteran, prepared for conflict. Keen buyer, Mr. Piccadilly, perhaps a trifle too keen in disparaging, as soon as put up, the lot he means to have at any price—somewhat too keen, perhaps again, in running up a lot to a price which, even in his hands, and with his connection, can't leave him much profit. But he is a nasty adversary, and has just spread-eagled two or three minor planets, who thought he was not in it, and found that cheap lots would always draw the veteran, when the Bunyan lot is reached.

It is shown round the tables. Mr. Piccadilly opens the sheet which contains the precious document, sniffs, screws up his eyes, purses his mouth, and actually throws it aside, to be taken up by Mr. Bond-Street, young, well and stylishly dressed, as becomes the place from

which he hails. But the big man's indifference has been catching ; the junior, who has often been an exceedingly good second to his neighbour's bidding, lays it down too. A third, let us say Mr. Tother'un, follows suit ; beyond these, it does not seem to go ; and the biddings are in shillings and take long to reach a pound. Indeed it is knocked down by mistake for less than two sovereigns, but put up again. Meantime, the purchaser that is to be, astonished at finding that the prize is not known, feels dawning on his mind the idea that it may possibly be his after all ; he may be happy yet. With head bent over a Piranesi's Rome, intently measuring the Milvian Bridge, outwardly calm and apparently unconcerned, he puts his hand behind his back to telegraph "Go on." The only competitor slackens, the interval between the bids gets longer, down falls the hammer, and the prize is won. Then only can the flush of triumph be no longer restrained, and it is permissible to say to the courteous, silver-haired President just then descended from the rostrum :

"I suppose you know what this is ?"

"No ; what is it ?"

"It is the warrant on which Bunyan was apprehended when he wrote 'Pilgrim's Progress.'"

"Ah ! did you know that ?"

"Certainly ; I can read Court hand, and know a little English history."

"If I had known that, you would never have got it for the price you have."

Chorus (in the person of a big amateur) : "No, and if I had known it, you would not have got it for the price you have."

The rest of the story reels off quick. The first thing was to protect it by a frame, then to repeat the historical references ; next the vendor had to be approached for information as to what he knew of its pedigree, promptly and courteously accorded by the family solicitor, to the effect previously stated. It is true he said, "I want my £500 for that Bunyan Warrant." Then a short letter to *The Times* announced the find, copied with wonderful quickness by newspapers all over the world, from Frisco to the Bay of Islands. It then remained to pass it through the fire of criticism, to account for its very existence having been forgotten, its reappearance after a couple of centuries in condition as clean and as perfect as the day of issue. But the game was worth the candle ; anything that could throw light on the birth of a book, which Green calls the most popular and best known in all English literature, which humanity took to its bosom directly it appeared, and whose touching points of

sympathy with human hopes and fears only become more and more appreciated as the years roll on, was worth an effort to thoroughly establish. It was, moreover, due to the priceless stores of learning open to all at the British Museum, and to the accomplished and able men who strive to make those treasures and their own skilled elucidations of them, available to the very humblest student, to place the finds before them. The dialogue with one of the chiefs there is worth reproducing ; in fact there have been many of the elements of a joke about this whole business :

"You have no business to have this ; it ought never to be in private hands. Why was I not told of this? Why did not Mr. Piccadilly tell me?"

"Because, sir, Mr. Piccadilly did not know it himself."

Great also was the joy of Dr. Brown when the evidence which finally proved his clever guess was shown to him. A reproduction now hangs in the Bunyan Museum at Bedford.

In due time, on the opening of their Session, the document was exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries, with an explanatory paper, which is published in their proceedings, and for which their thanks were accorded. The reproduction also met with favour from them. How another has since been made, by Vander Weyde, which resembles the original in the minutest detail, even to colour of paper and seals in red wax, so that the world can see the document which ushered into existence the most popular and successful book ever seen, need not be dwelt on here. But a country which joys in the graceful virtues and simple goodness which find almost their highest exemplar in the private life of its Sovereign, will hear with a throb of pleasure how the Queen was, in Sir H. Ponsonby's words, *glad* to receive one of these reproductions, and to place it in the same library at Windsor Castle where lies enshrined the Bible of the martyr Gordon. In this, as well as other things, the nation can recognise that the heart of its ruler beats true in tone with that of her subjects, and of the great race beyond the sea sprung from the shores over which she rules, for Bunyan is greater in America than in the land of his birth, save perhaps at Bedford, and the New York Tract Society alone issues yearly 12,000 "Progresses," while the American pilgrim visits the home of Bunyan as religiously as he does the nidus of the Washingtons.

The moral of the whole thing is that discoveries are still possible even in these latter days by those who can

Grasp the skirts of happy Chance,  
and that, too, in the most unlikely places, such as the collection of